Spring 1995

Review of Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History

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Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History. Eds. William Craft Brumfield and Blair A. Ruble. New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1993. xiv, 332 pp. Index. Figures. Tables. Hard bound.

In their introduction to this volume the editors write: "Our authors seek to provide a comprehensive review of Russian housing design and practice, from the transformation of concepts of private housing during the two decades before 1917 to the creation of mass, industrialized housing structures in the post-Stalinist period." While they have succeeded admirably in fulfilling this primary goal, they have far exceeded it by compiling a cohesive, complex and at times moving history of an idea that continues to have very particular resonances in Russia. Representing a number of disciplines, the contributors treat the concept of housing in its broadest and most humanistic sense. They examine both architecture and the more abstract concepts of living space and social planning, the look of buildings and their function, the physical requirements of shelter as well as the compelling psychological need for domesticity, for a home of one's own in a country where all land belongs to the state. As a result, what might have been just a typology of Russian housing types over the past century—from the *izba*, the *osobniak* and the *dokhodnyi dom* to the agro-town, the *komunalka* and the dacha—is instead a rich social history that will be of real value, not just to art historians, historians, social and political scientists, but to anyone trying to understand how the lifestyle and psyche of Russians have been shaped and reshaped by the treatment of their living space.

Of the nine essays the first three deal with housing before 1917, laying out some of the central issues that give the collection its strong thematic unity and sense of direction. In his discussion of space organization in the peasant *izba* Robert Edelman examines gender as a shaping factor in the use of living space, the individual vis-à-vis the family and the social unit, the relationship of town and country, tradition at loggerheads with change and the issue of choice in determining the domestic environment. While William Brumfield's chapter on the prerevolutionary private house

essentially recaps his valuable work on the stylistic formation of Moscow and Petersburg *moderne*, his analysis of the apartment house as a symptom of the rise of capitalism and as a symbol of the break-up of the peasant social structure breaks important new ground and confronts the goals of "social history" implied in the title.

Milka Bliznakov's meticulously documented chapter on experimental architecture of the 1920s brings us to the heart of the volume's intentions by using architecture as an instrument of sociological, not just art historical research. Her re-examination of the utopian schemes of the avant-garde sheds new light on the "love-hate relationship" of Soviet architects with their counterparts in Europe and America, shows how communal housing was conceived as a tool of social engineering and examines the way sex roles shaped living space. Vladimir Paperny's chapter on, "Men, Women and the Living Space" (a misleading title, since the "subordinate role of women" receives no more attention than "the special treatment of water"), considers living space in light of the wölfflinian comparison of distinct constructivist and stalinist cultures already familiar from his book *Kul'tura "Dva."*

The remaining four articles not only employ the methodologies of the social sciences, they also point out the impact that this new discipline had on Soviet housing after World War II. Stephen Kotkin shows how communal living in the industrial town of Magnitogorsk was both coerced and enforced through the provision of crucial facilities, and bred in the process ideal conditions for surveillance and the *komunalka.* Judith Pallot's chapter on housing the agricultural labor force focuses on the pro-urban bias in rural housing, the growth of a school of rural architecture in the 1970s and the resurfacing of a desire for private housing under perestroika. The issue of domesticity—both its decline and its possible rebirth—is central to the last two chapters. Blair Ruble examines the aesthetic deprivation that resulted from Khrushchev's mass housing program and a construction industry determined to cut costs by imposing uniformity and standardization on Soviet citizens, while Aleksandr Vysokovskii's insights as a consumer or victim of Soviet housing remind us that the current state of housing in post-perestroika Russia is the logical conclusion to the theories and practices discussed in the preceding chapters (the multipurpose bedroom-diningroom, for example, is a grim survivor of the constructivist furniture of the 1920s).

Having built up, chapter by chapter, a sobering narrative of the systematic undermining of personal choice, privacy and domesticity in the name of communal living and mass construction, the editors nevertheless conclude on a note of cautious optimism that the overpowering need for an environment of domestic tranquility is beginning to reassert itself in Russia, as more citizens begin to build their own homes and dachas.

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